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Me Siento: Transgender Latinx Lives and Belonging in the 21st Century

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by

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Dedication

To my dear friend Tynesha Davis aka Lovely aka Jenny Keys who left this Earth by her own choosing during the course of this project: you believed in me from the beginning and I would never have set foot in academia if it was not for your genuine support, friendship, love, and brilliance. Words can never describe how much I miss you – your laugh, food adventures, and how much music hit both our souls in ways nothing else could. I wrote with my heart and with liberation in my mind just like you would have wanted me to. Rest in power, friend.

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Abstract

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The body facilitates a sense of (not) belonging for transgender Latinx subjects. Looking at contemporary cultural productions of transgender Latinx identity, I unpack the ways in which transgender Latinxs engage with their bodies to "belong" in the everyday. Seeking to contribute to contemporary dialogue surrounding transgender bodies within conceptualizations of latinidad, Chapter 1 critiques representations of transgender Latinxs in contemporary media, such as *Mala Mala, Strut*, Sirena Selena, and the *Salt Mines*. I focus specifically on the ways in which the body is engaged with and spoken about by each character, highlighting the tensions and complexities of feeling, belonging to, and embodying both Latinidad and transgenderness. In Chapter 2, I create an exemplary short story titled "Barrio Queer" to illustrate the racialized and cis/gendered dimensions of conceptions of (trans) gender embodiment and Puerto Rican identity, the connection to the divine, national belonging amongst diasporic subjects, and feminist introspection of masculinity. Finally, I conclude that the everyday bodily negotiations, tensions, and practices transgender Latinx subjects experience to foster a sense of (not) belonging to both

gender *and* latinidad are crucial inclusions to narratives and representations of gender embodiment.

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INTRODUCTION

Contextualizing Transgender

Transgender visibility exploded in the United States after the 2013 Colorado Civil Rights Board ruling in favor of Coy Mathis, a white 6-year-old transgender girl from Fountain, Colorado who was barred from using her elementary school's girls' bathroom. After the ruling, controversial "bathroom bills" and other policies emerged across several states, making transgender people (and their bodies) a national conversation. TIME Magazine termed the phrase "transgender tipping point" to refer to this point in U.S. transgender history. Transgender people are now the topic of conversation in policy, in academic discourses, in social justice platforms, in TV and film – both positively and negatively. Increasingly, some transgender subjects who previously may have been marked for death are finding themselves hailed as legally recognized, protected, depathologized, rights-bearing minority subjects (Stryker 31).

Influencers such as Chaz Bono and Caitlyn Jenner, as well as TV shows and films such as *Transparent* (2014), *Becoming Us* (2015), *Boy Meets Girl* (2014), and *3 Generations* (2015) have all been part of the conversation. In fact, despite the fact that Laverne Cox illustriously sported the cover of the aforementioned issue of TIME Magazine, the transgender tipping point has actually been invested in depicting *white* transgender people tackling love, family, relationships, transitioning, and other aspects of social life while leaving transgender people of color curiously absent from the narrative

entirely or rendered to a state of desolate life. Academically, while transgender people have always existed, transgender studies is a relatively new subfield of LGBT studies that emerged out of and alongside queer theory. As a field of study, the publication of Sandy Stone's essay "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," a response to the notoriously transphobic text The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male (1979) by Janice Raymond (a text that unfortunately served to inform most understandings of transgender people, feminist identified and otherwise) unofficially marks the inception of transgender studies. From suggesting expansions of gender categories, uncovering the precarious history of notions of gender rooted in colonialism, to even alluding to the abolition of gender, scholars not aligned with the ideas of Janice Raymond have since worked to recover the figure of the transgender person from this transphobic history. However, these efforts often fundamentally misrepresent not only transgender lives, but how transgender people imagine themselves and their futures as gendered people and what may/may not be at stake for them in regard to undergoing any kind of gender transitioning process. With stakes including but not limited to having any impact on their personal health, financial stability, connection to communities and families, cultural expectations of behavior as a gendered person, and feeling of beauty and desire, transgender embodiment reaches far beyond "performing" gender".

Despite this nuance, representations of transgender people's bodies and lives in both contemporary media and academia typically fall under one or more of the following tropes. The first is the sex worker, usually a Black or Latina transgender woman prone to death and isolation. The second are explorations of transgender surgeries, hormone

therapy, and other physical and medical processes used in so-called “gender transition journeys”. And the third trope is alluding to drag culture as some kind of similar, parallel world to try and talk about gender embodiment and fluidity. While such bleak, genital-centered tropes may indeed be a reality for many transgender people, such representations offer no room to imagine transgender people — particularly transgender Latinxs[1] — living fulfilling lives, being close to family, dating and being in love, having varying trajectories of gender transitioning, and ultimately having life-sustaining opportunities for the future.

This is especially the case for representations and conversations surrounding transgender Latinxs and latinidad in the United States, with Sylvia Rivera being one of the only diasporic transgender Latinx voices to be historically recognized as such, likely due to her revolutionary nature. Even with her recognition, Rivera’s legacy became widely valued well after her untimely death, and her life unfortunately mirrored much of the aforementioned tropes commonly invoked in representations in transgender communities. So, who and where *are* transgender Latinxs in the United States? What do

[1] Traced back to online uses (primarily across social media platforms) around 2004, the “x” at the end of Latinx has served multiple purposes. Due to the inherent gender binary in the Spanish language, which lacks a gender neutral noun form, the "x" instead of the gendered "a" or "o" is a purposeful break from this grammatical tradition. For some queer and transgender-identified Latinxs, the linguistic gender-bending and gender-relieving of the word “latino/a” for “latinx” is an important identificatory marker. In this case, the “x” specifically gestures queerness. For others, the “x” instead of the “o” is an intentional linguistic choice in an attempt to de-masculinize the Spanish language — a move usually rooted in feminist and/or anti-sexist politics by the identifier regardless of their sexual/gender identity.

their lives look like, and how do they manage to live while occupying contested categories of both race and gender? To begin to answer these questions, I examine digital and literary texts portraying transgender latinxs in popular media and academic — *Mala Mala* (2014) and *Strut* (2016), Sirena Selena (2000), and *The Salt Mines* (1990). Produced by Antonio Santini and Dan Sickles, *Mala Mala* is described as a documentary film depicting the lives and stories of nine transgender Puerto Ricans. *Strut*, produced by Whoopi Goldberg, follows the lives of five transgender models who all work for Slay - the United States' first all-transgender modeling agency. *Sirena Selena* written by Mayra Santos-Febres is a fictional novel following the life of protagonist Selena — a 15-year-old hustler and then-male-presenting young transgender girl discovered in the backstreets of San Juan, Puerto Rico by Martha Divine (transgender woman and sex worker). Addicted to drugs and living in garbage dumpsters, Selena blows away everyone that is able to hear her incredible singing voice. Strangers off the street even cry listening to the beauty of her voice. Martha Divine takes Selena under her wing and auditions her to be a performer at the luxury hotels in the Dominican Republic. Hugo Graubel, one of the hotel's investors who is married with children, falls in love with fifteen year old Selena and pursues to initiate a relationship with her. In an attempt to escape poverty and abuse Selena suffered her entire life, she seduces Hugo as a means of survival. Both comedic and tragic, *Sirena Selena* is the only literary depictions of gender variance in Puerto Rican literature. Lastly, *The Salt Mines* is a documentary created by Carlos Aparicio and Susana Aikin that follows the lives of three transgender Latinas living in Manhattan, who happen to be addicted to drugs and participate in sex work to support their lives. The

women live in the parking lot of a salt processing plant inside of makeshift homes comprised of broken garbage trucks. The parking lot is where the New York Department of Sanitation stores salt deposits for the winter, hence the title of the documentary "The Salt Mines."

In addition to these works, I examine recent transgender and queer theoretical pieces to investigate how these representations of transgender Latinxs work with or against the aforementioned popular tropes. In doing so, I expand contributions made towards thinking about gender and latinidad to consider how specifically transgender Latinxs, particularly those living in the diaspora, must maneuver and negotiate shifting moments of gendered and racial/ethnic interpretation and engagement to achieve a sense of belonging.

CHAPTER 1: TRANSGENDER LATINX REPRESENTATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY TV, LITERATURE, & FILM

Trans Futures: Death, Misery, and Isolation

One of the four tropes commonly deployed in representations of transgender people is that of the miserable, isolated, and destitute transgender subject. This trope is often alluded to in terms of death and infliction of physical violence on transgender people, separation from family, homelessness, participation in sex work, and overall living in poor and impoverished conditions. An example of this trope is exemplified in the novel *Sirena Selena* written in 2000 by Mayra Santos-Febres. Protagonist Selena, whose character is portrayed as a boy who performs in drag and dresses as a woman, is discovered singing and picking through garbage in the streets of San Juan, Puerto Rico as a young teenager by a transgender woman named Martha Divine. Selena has a voice that brings people to their knees and tears to their eyes, and Martha believes that she is meant for more than just being 'another' a sex worker on the streets of San Juan.

Convincing a young Selena to kick her cocaine habit and focus solely on hustling men and making a career off her voice, Martha Divine and Selena travel between the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and New York City, performing at hotels and hustling straight men along the way:

> *"She had always sung privately for the most glamorous locas in the city's gay scene. But she was still too young to be able to get a contract in the tourist hotels. "Even if you lie about your age, they can't hire you, mi amor. Federal laws prohibit child labor. Don't you know that? So, instead," said her new mother, "we'll go to the*

Dominican Republic, where they don't care about such things." And now, thanks to the federal laws, Sirena Selena was about to become the diva of the Caribbean." (5)

Here, Selena is understood to be embodying the flow of global capital required for the functioning of modern Capitalism (in all of its racialized and dimensions). Selena's trips to the Dominican Republic (and later New York City) – a crossing of international borders – creates movement not to create communities, but alliances based on common interests now organized by capital and economic power (Arroyo 2003). That convergence of intimacy and the economic, not only (potentially) complement each other, but they are invisibly central to the way people construct their interpersonal relations and live their life (Zelizer 2007).

Eithne Luibhéid and Lionel Cantú Jr. in Queer Migrations: Sexuality, U.S. Citizenship, and Border Crossings highlight important questions regarding sexuality and migration including, "How does sexuality shape migration processes? How do concerns about sexuality shape U.S. immigration control strategies and constructions of citizenship? How has mass migration in the past quarter century transformed U.S. queer communities, cultures, and politics? In what ways Is sexuality a source of conflict within migrant communities, and between migrant and U.S. communities (Luibhéid and Cantú 2005)." I want to expand these questions to include gender identity (having a sense of gender/feeling gender) within the equation of sexuality (an aspect of processes of gender), as well as include first and second generation diasporic people in the process of being incorporated into the United States and its assumed/expected notions of identity, being, and belonging. Transnationalism studies that have pursued questions of gendered

transnational movement find that transmigratory (Glick-Schiller 1995) practices are usually not individual choices but influenced by the division of labor and power within households. Gender, age and relationships among members of the household are all up for negotiation in this division. Given so, studies tend to argue that women move less freely or have more socially embedded, or encumbered, spatial existences (Pratt & Yeoh 2010; Chant 1998).

For example, Pratt and Yeah note differences in how men and women experience transnational parenting and elderly care. Citing a study on Filipino transnational familial movement (Parrenas 2002), women who rely on extended family to take care of children and all immediate needs while overseas are able to live a less mobile transnational life. This is in contrast to men who, for example, may come and go frequently in order to maintain their dominant status in both the home and host countries. Women resettle more fully than men and live less mobile transnational existences. This illustrates how gender relations are transformed through transnational movement, how inequities may be renewed through processes of migration, and how gender is bound up in nation making. Pratt and Yeoh refer to this as an example of "long distance nationalism", as well as an actualization of "patriarchal norms of national belonging" (Pratt & Yeoh 2010). However, women are implicitly conceptualized as not only straight and cis (due to the analysis being in relation to men), but as a component of a familial unit. What about women of different gendered experiences, such as transgender women? Or of 'alternative' families and their priorities, flow of capital, and systems of care, such as the one made between Martha Divine and Selena as seen in *Sirena Selena*? Which migrant

experiences do we turn to in order to understand mobility, belonging, and nation? While this specific aspect of transnational studies is beyond the scope of this particular project, the ways in which we conceptualize families in mapping transnational movement must be re-thought to include queer and transgender-inclusive methods of family building.

This re-conceptualization includes not only the inclusion of experiences of gender (transgender, genderqueer[2], etc[3]), but of how families of vulnerable populations often are comprised of non-blood and platonic related members, and how reproduction can be decentered as the driving force of the familial transnational unit. In addition to heteronormative familial units, transnationalism studies texts (including transnational novels) commonly focuses on moments of "illegal" border crossing, as well as invoke imageries of harrowing violence and depravation. I want to focus on moments in which queer and transgender subjects cross borders, particularly inter-Caribbean movement. Airports and other transnational spaces are particular points of difficulty for transgender subjects given the fact that their often mis-matched legal documents and physical appearance automatically deems them as suspicious (Currah & Mulqueen 2011; Beauchamp 2013; Blas 2013, 2016; Silva Santana 2017; Luibhéid and Cantú 2005).

> *"But takeoffs and landings always provoked anxiety in her. And there was no anxiety in this world that didn't prompt Martha to think about her body. Oh yes, her body, this disguise that was her body. She trembled just thinking that someone, in the middle of takeoff, might point a finger at her and shout, "Look at that. That is not a*

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2 Refers to a person who does not adhere to conventional gender distinctions while identifying with neither, both, or a combination of male and female genders

3 I say "etc" here to refer people of (non)gendered experiences where terms like "transgender" or "genderqueer" are equally as insufficient as "man" and "woman" to capture their essence(s)

woman." And they would turn the aircraft around and force her from it, throwing her suitcases to the ground. Her bags would open, suddenly spewing high heels, gauze and tape, depilatory creams, and thousands of other cosmetic items, lending themselves, the bitches, as evidence. The captain himself would deplane to insist that she had no right to enjoy the comfort, the airborne luxury, the dream of traveling to other shores. Not her, she's an imposter." (10)

Here, Martha Divine details this exact experience of the transgender Puerto Rican transnational subject, and the bodily, affective, socioeconomic costs of this movement. While illustrating the affective and psychological dimensions of these encounters, Martha's account gets at the material/bodily ingredients of gendered regulation and expectations. For Martha, transnational movement is not merely taking a trip. Rather, it is the means of which she moves her life forward. Her anxiety is a testament to the gendered double consciousness[4] (Du Bois 1903) transgender transnational subjects

[4] W.E.B. Du Bois coined the term "double consciousness," in which he describes the way "One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois 1903, 5)." DuBoisian double consciousness requires a distinction of how you see yourself in relation to how the (white) world sees you, while knowing that both perceptions are operating simultaneously and is highly contextual. I use the term "gendered double consciousness" to allude to the similar process of the constant awareness of how transgender people perceive, feel, and understand their gendered selves in relation to how the outside gendered world actually sees them. An example of one moment in which a gendered double consciousness is operating is when a transgender man who has begun to undergo physical means of gender transitioning and masculinizing but is early in the process and may not be perceived as male all the time. The constant awareness of being and feeling like a man while being seen as "something else", in this case as not a man or not a feminine woman (and the potential devaluation as a result of this in-betweenness/ambiguity). Another example is simply existing as a stealth transgender person (as in a trans person that does not openly reveal they are transgender) and knowing that cisness will be assumed of them unless somehow informed otherwise.

experience in the everyday; a double consciousness (Du Bois 1903) that directly reflects and speaks to "normative" ideas of gender as regulated by the nation state.

This gendered double consciousness (Du Bois 1903) can be seen again when Valentina Frenesí (58), fellow transgender sex worker and guardian/friend of Selena, who she calls Serenito [5]. One night when Valentina and Selena were out hustling together in San Juan, two suspicious clients pulled up in a grey Mercedes with tinted windows. "The whitest hand holding a big wad of bills" came out of the car, but the clients told Valentina no, and that they only wanted Serenito. Desperate for money but having a bad feeling about the men, she lets Selena go. Panicking throughout the night, she sets out to the streets to find Selena:

> *"She felt a faint murmur of sobs, a slight movement among the boxes; then she saw him, with his pants pulled halfway down, his hands clenched, his underwear blood…She cried, cried with him. She lifted him from the debris, laid him over her shoulder, kicked off her shoes and ran to a public telephone to call a taxi to take them to the neighborhood hospital."* (63)

As she called for a taxi, nobody would take them because the taxis did not want to get blood in their cars, and Valentina had no money to pay to have it cleaned up afterwards. Desperate, she runs to the Dominican-owned café nearby to see if she could locate Chino, a pseudo-cab driver who would give you a ride in his station wagon if you paid him, but he was not a taxi business. He agreed:

[5] Throughout the novel, the author switches between male and female pronouns to refer to the protagonist. While perhaps it is to allude to the gender variance of the protagonist, it is uncertain as to why the author does this. By extension, characters throughout the book such as Valentina make a similar move and refer to Selena as both male and female.

"As well as she could, Valentina explained what had happened, and they loaded the boy in the rear of the car.

"This as far as I can go mamita, if the guards start asking questions it could get ugly. You'd better prepare yourself. What are you going to say to the nurse when she asks you for the boy's papers?"

"I'll lie," said Valentina; she'd like like she never had lied before. Throw herself into the performance of her life to save her amiguito's." (68)

Valentina got Selena to the hospital but had to lay low when it came to being comforting towards her Serenito, for now she was in the hands of social services. Insisting that Valentina get Selena out of the hospital, saying, "How's the government going to take care of me? By locking me up in a home and treating me like trash? The only place I can make it is on the street, Valentina. On the street (Santos-Febres 65)." Against Valentina's wishes, she dressed as a civilian in pants and long T-shirts. She took off her makeup, wore a baseball cap, and presented as masculine as possible in order to navigate this space properly to help her Serenito. Knowing that not only are transgender women associated with crime and sex work, but that Valentina is physically perceived to embody a particular type of womanhood that does not pass as the "normal". Additionally, her relationship to what is understood to be a young boy that was sexually assaulted would raise even more suspicion if she was to be outted as a transgender woman. Therefore, Valentina's dressing in more masculine clothes, staying low and attempting to pass as a masculine caregiver instead of a transgender woman is a moment in which she is acknowledging not only her own body, but the ways in which the world looks onto her in relation to the body. This moment of Valentina's navigation of the

hospital is another example of gendered double consciousness (Du Bois 1903) in transgender transnational subjects.

While these characters and accounts in *Sirena Selena* are fictional, they mirror the experiences and stories told in the Puerto Rican documentary *Mala Mala*. Produced by Antonio Santini and Dan Sickles, *Mala Mala* is described as a documentary film depicting the lives and stories of nine transgender Puerto Ricans. Sandy, a bleach-blonde haired, blue eyed transgender woman and sex worker interviewed in *Mala Mala*, further exemplifies this trope. One of the beginning scenes of *Mala Mala* shows Sandy putting on make up in the bathroom and talking about her life as a sex worker. She says:

For the street, you have to be different. You have to be like more soft, but hooker, sexy. We always try to be like, you know, to be the most beautiful than a woman because we have to call attention from the guys. And if the woman is more beautiful than you, why are the guys gone look to you? You have something that the guys no like, so you need beauty to help.

Possibly distinguishing herself from transgender women and cisgender women, Sandy highlights the importance of being beautiful for men to "overlook" the fact of her transgender status. For Sandy, beauty is enacted not only through invoking characteristics of whiteness (bleached hair and blue contacts), but of proximity to cisness ("You have something that the guys no like, so you need beauty to help.") She goes on to describe a typical night of sex work in which she reiterates the importance of appearing beautiful and desirable,

You don't know how big is the imagination of the client is sometimes. Sometimes you say, "Damn, that motherfucker is crazy!" But…I cannot, you know, show my ugly face. I have to be like, Oh you like it? But inside of me I say, Damn you dirty nasty fucking mother fucker!"

Sandy's life is portrayed throughout the film under these conditions, including moments where she longs to be able to surgically alter her sexual organs and quit her life of sex work. Family, friendships, nor recent updates of Sandy life were shown throughout the rest of the film.

Another example of this strained path for freedom is Sara from the film *The Salt Mines*. *The Salt Mines* offers a narrative of transgender life in communities of color, focusing on stories of migration, poverty, and disease as opposed to the glamour of participating in the ball scene and lifestyle.

The film follows the life of several transgender women of color living in the parking lot of an old salt reserve that has been converted into a makeshift transgender village. The women are shown living in broken down garbage trucks, taking crack-cocaine, cooking hamburgers over a campfire, injecting female hormones, and giving each other spiritual readings. An evangelical pastor who hopes of "saving" the women's lives regularly visits the Salt Mines, offering clothes, food, and other goods. While he does provide certain resources, he is also stern on "curing" the women of their "deviant" queerness. Of particular interest of the pastor is Sara, a transgender woman who fled Cuba to escape anti-queer persecution. She was addicted to crack and living with AIDS. When her health began to visibly decline, Sara made the decision to leave the salt mines with the evangelical pastor and convert. Not only did she convert her religion, but she also adopted her birth name - Ricardo. Essentially, upon this move, Sara de-transition her gender to male, masculinized their body, renounced "homosexual desire", and got married in hopes of becoming a husband and father.

Visibly uncomfortable throughout the film and met with horror and concern by Sara's old friends, the film ends with Sara's final monologue. Sara's body had succumbed to AIDS, and her dying declarations were that she wishes she could have died a woman and that she regrets having ever gone with the pastor. This heartbreaking end to Sara/Ricardo's life illustrates several important points. First, before leaving to join the pastor, Sara lived a poor quality life. Unable to remain in her home nation of Cuba for not meeting the national standard of sexuality and gender, Sara arrived in the United States in hopes of escaping such consequences. Upon arrival, though having escaped legal persecution, Sara's life appears to be met with poverty, disease, discrimination, and inadequate healthcare as a direct result of her being a transgender Latina. The evangelical pastor further enforces these particular standards of gender and sexuality by his constant visits and attempts to "save" them from their life of deviance. Despite all of this, what other life-sustaining possibilities and opportunities did Sara/Ricardo truly have available? Similarly to the conditions that brought Valentina to present as masculine in order to enter the hospital when visiting an injured Sirenito, the choice between living in abject poverty as Sara or comfortably, and even middle class, as Ricardo and the conditions that setup such a decision to be made is precisely the issue here in itself.

Malnourished and becoming increasingly ill, Sara/Ricardo sacrificed her breast implants and hormones, attraction to men, and queerness just to have a chance at continuing to stay alive. Yet, this ultimately failed Sara/Ricardo, as she passed away sick, alone, unhappy, unrecognized, unfulfilled, and a deep sense of regret. According to Luibhéid and Cantú, ongoing efforts to control the entry of noncitizens (including those

"othered" into second class citizenship) is a key technology through which the sovereignty of a nation is reconstructed (Luibhéid and Cantú 2005, xiii). In the case of Sara/Ricardo, the nation she escaped failed her and the nation she entered eventually killed her.

In 1987, according to Luibhéid and Cantú, added HIV/AIDS as part of the list of dangerous illnesses migrants must test negative for, delimiting nation and citizenry, as well as constructing portraits of what and who should not belong. While this policy came after the life of Sara and is no longer in place, it speaks to how ideas of sexuality and gender are constructed as points of measure of good and moral character fit for citizenship (Luibhéid and Cantú xiv). There is a cruel irony in that Cuba, Sara/Ricardo's homeland, is a country with profound medical progress in regard to HIV/AIDs treatments and transmission prevention (La Binns 2013; Taylor et al 2017). Yet, Sara/Ricardo is exiled to a country who as a consequence of their own queerness and is met with extremely poor living conditions upon arrival in the United States. Contracting the illness that ultimately destabilized her life is in itself a result of the poor living conditions transgender people of color are so often pipelined into experiencing. Cuba and much of its nationalistic efforts and histories are marked on Sara/Ricardo's body. How, exactly, do violence and isolation find queer and transgender subjects so successfully?

When I think of the State, I think of an apparatus concerned with ideas of territory, sovereignty, governance, and human populations. When I think of a Nation, I think of a group of people with a collective and unifying sense of self. The strengths of the Nation are its social, cultural, political and emotional dimensions, whereas the State

in itself is fundamentally a political apparatus that can be destabilized (Yuval-Davis 1997; Anderson 1983; McClintock 1995; Kaplan 1999; Alarcon 1999; Moallem 1999; Grewal 1996; Mohanty 1995). In thinking of how they both interact with each other in relation to gender, the Nation helps carry out the function of the State partly by creating the ingredients of its subjects – in this case its gendered subjects. In the case of transgender people of color, I want to know how does cisness operate as both an ingredient of the Nation and a political concern of the State?

The concept of Foucauldian biopolitics describes the calculation of costs and benefits through which the biological capacities of a population are optimally managed for state/state-like by way of disciplinary and excitatory practices (Stryker 38). Sexuality is one dimension of this calculation. In the case of Foucauldian biopolitics, sexuality is conceptualized to be in relation to reproductive capacity and modes of subjective identification, expression of desire, and pursuit of erotic pleasure (Stryker 39). While Foucault does not explicitly address issues of gender in the operation of biopower, gendering practices are inextricably enmeshed with notions of sexuality. According to Susan Stryker, gender undergirds the homo/hetero distinction due to the fact that the identity of the desiring subject and that of the object of desire are in themselves characterized by gender. However, despite the gendering processes of sexual identification, gender here does not pertain primarily to questions of representations. Here, gender is an apparatus within which all bodies are taken up and create material realities, including those of which operate under bureaucratic tracking such as birth certificates, passports, and other state-sanctioned documents (Stryker 39).

As with the fictional life of Martha Divine and Valentina, Sara is a real-life example of the ways in which lack of proximity to cisness combined with poverty and processes of racialization produces desolate living conditions for transgender people of color. Through Sara/Ricardo's body, we see, as Myra Mendible puts it in *From Bananas to Buttocks* (2007), race and gender are crucial vehicles in the production of national identity (Mendible 2007, 8). The violent dis/membering and exclusion process that takes place when forging a distinct U.S. identity - one that is in close proximity of whiteness and heteronormativity. Given this limited requirement for belonging, Sara/Ricardo's Caribbeanness, queerness, and trans-ness are all central factors that ultimately contributed to their fate. If the nation is represented as territorially grounded, linguistically uniform, racially exclusive, androcentric and heterosexual, Sara/Ricardo's life and death is invisible. Not a fictional account by any means, Sara/Ricardo's life and death is certainly not the kind of story iterations of both Cuba and the United States as a nation seeks to admit nor represent. Sara/Ricardo's life is located largely on the streets of New York City along with her fellow transgender women of color community. Yet, Sara/Ricardo life is precisely the consequence of particular understandings and enforcements of the nation that undergo Mendible's dis/membering and exclusionary processes. Living a life "in congruence with static medico-juridical determinations of one's sex/gender and living a life in defiance of that congruence is a highly consequential one, due to the fact that our social institutions are structured to uphold and to privilege the former (Enke 2012, 64)." Congruency of sex/gender, legibility, and consistency within a binary gender system

accompanied by the appearance of normative race, class, ability, and nationality is not a privilege Sara/Ricardo had.

I move now to juxtapose this imagery of isolation, sex work, and uncertainty with Laith De La Cruz, a Dominican transgender man born in Harlem, New York featured in *Strut*. In the Pilot episode of *Strut*, Laith introduces himself and the circumstances of his life, such as living in the projects with his mother. In telling his story, the scene begins with Laith's mother, Agueda, asking Laith to make her a cup of decaf coffee. She tells Laith (possibly jokingly) that he should come to church, in which Laith begins explaining that his mother is Pentecostal Christian, "I did go to church with her a couple times. They would point at me and say, "There is a demonic spirit within this person. Lets pray for her!" The last time it happened I got up and left." The scene then shows Agueda and Laith facing each other from across the room, in which Laith begins saying:

> ***Laith:*** *I just want you to respect me as the person that I am.*
> ***Agueda:*** *And that's what I do*
> ***Laith:*** *No you don't! You said it yourself. You say its not normal, it's a sin, you're going to hell because…*

Agueda then cuts Laith off and says, "I don't say that, my Bible say that!" Laith responds:

> ***Laith:*** *Does it? I've never read that in there.*
> ***Agueda:*** *People don't want to see what they don't wanna see. You want to force me to call you he but I can't..*
> ***Laith:*** *It just seems like you don't even try*
> ***Agueda:*** *I don't wanna try.*
> ***Laith:*** *So you're ashamed? You're ashamed of me.*
> ***Agueda:*** *It was my dream to see you growing up with a nice beautiful dress*
> ***Laith:*** *That wasn't me. This is who I am. Mom…are you crying?*

With Agueda beginning to cry, Laith becomes visibly concerned and walks over to embrace his mother. He begins crying with her:

> ***Laith:*** *I'm sorry. You see, you are suffering. This is why it effects me a lot.*
> ***Agueda:*** *It's not easy.*
> ***Laith:*** *I know*
> ***Agueda:****You know the way I think, the way I am, the way I grew up…*
> ***Laith:*** *You know how many times I threw myself on the floor to pray so I can change? Thinking that if I die I'm going straight to hell for who I am?*
> ***Agueda:*** *I know that God can only change that part of your life.*
> ***Laith:*** *But I like who I am! I like who I see in the mirror now. This is how I'm comfortable*
> ***Agueda:*** *Then be happy Ashley. Don't worry about what mommy think right now.*

The scene switches to an emotional Laith commenting on the exchange between him and his mother, in which he explains his internal frustrations of negotiating familial responsibilities and his own self-preservation, "When she's looking at me, she's looking at the little girl Ashley. It makes me feel like I don't know who I am and I don't think anyone else can tell me who I am. Like, even though I know that, there is still that need to please other people like my family and obviously that fear of going to hell." This is one of many moments that is exemplary of the complicated, and at times tense, paradoxical, and vulnerable, positionality transgender people of color experience in their enactment of their gender within the context of their family. In other words, family and how transgender people of color engage with their family is inextricably tied to their overall engagement with their gendered selves. The scene ends with both Laith and Agueda in tears, hugging and saying they love each other.

Later in Episode 5 entitled 'Cover Girl', Laith and his mother are shown again making coffee in their Harlem apartment. The scene begins with Laith reflecting on the

current state of the dynamic between him and his mother. He says, "My mom and I are close. Essentially the only thing that separates us is my transition. She still struggles with pronouns and seeing me as her son." The camera returns to the two together in the kitchen and Laith asks his mother what has been going on lately at church:

> ***Agueda:*** *They ask me for "Ashley"…"Where's your daughter? She is the model?….Let me see the picture!"*

After imitating a shocked yet happy reaction of showing Laith's pictures to her peers, she goes on to say:

> ***Agueda:*** *There was somebody running his mouth and I told them. They was like, "Sister Melo, that was your son?" I said "Uh-Huh…" and they said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know." Yeah…I said, "Yeah, that is my son."*

Mouth dropped, Laith acknowledged that it was the first time his mother acknowledged him as her son, despite living under the same roof for the entirety of his gender-transition. Teary eyed, Laith goes on to say, "My mom shows my modeling pictures to everyone. So even though she doesn't agree with me having transitioned or maybe she wishes I would de-transition, there is a part of her that is proud….I think it is a mourning process for her and I need to learn to be patient with her as she transitions with me."

Following this reflection, Agueda tells Laith, "Don't worry, Ashley. I'm always going to love you as my son, as my daughter, you're always going to be my kid. I'm always going to take care of you. And I will do whatever I gotta do." Afterwards, Laith tells the viewer "She calls me she, but she has come along way. I have accepted her not accepting me fully because I know she loves me and it's not me, it's her and it's her thing

to deal with her religious beliefs." The scene ends, again, with the two hugging and saying they love each other.

Not only does he see his family as actually being part of his gender transition, he is completely unwilling to negotiate his role as a member of his family regardless of whether or not they respect his gender identity. Additionally, between Laith's underlying fear of hell to Agueda's unexpected support of Laith by her religious peers, we continue to see the role of the church and how it remains a pivotal ingredient to their lives and sense of belonging.

"The Surgery": Bodily Constructions and Cis-Proximity

The second trope to unpack is that of the transgender person who has/has not undergone sexual reassignment surgery, also referred to as "bottom surgery". Sexual reassignment surgery (SRS) encompasses several surgical procedures performed to change the sexual organs of an individual to align more closely with the genitalia of their respective gender identity. At the surface, such a procedure may appear perfectly reasonable and a likely part of a transgender person's life. However, according to the National Transgender Discrimination Survey Report on Health and Healthcare, 20-30% of transgender women have no desire at all for SRS (Grant et al 2015). That very same report found that 45%-72% of transgender men also have no interest in SRS (Grant et al 2015). Reasons for not wanting the surgery range from being unable to afford the procedures, lack of desire or options, as well as wanting to preserve the ability to have biological children (all of which support the idea that reproductive rights issues are

indeed transgender rights issues). Despite these figures, questions surrounding "the surgery" and other measures of proximity to cis-bodies are constantly imposed on transgender people including but not limited to treatment towards (questions and interactions), imaginings (can one imagine a transgender person without first imagining their body?), and representations of transgender people.

One of the goals of *Strut* has been to work against these assumptions and expectations transgender body. This effort can be seen in Episode 5 of *Strut* entitled 'Cover Girl', where the models meet with the International Creative Director for Spiegel Catalog. Not only has Spiegel never had a transgender person on the cover, the contents and images of Spiegel are valued as idolized and often unattainable forms of gender embodiment and beauty. Slay model Arisce Wanzer, a Black transgender woman who is adamantly against taking hormones or undergoing sexual reassignment surgery, was chosen for the cover. Arisce's Spiegel cover is one of few moments in which transgender women of color, particularly ones who choose not to undergo means of gender transitioning that require medical intervention, are depicted as aspirational representations of female beauty.

I juxtapose *Strut*'s turn to Black and Latinx transgender bodies of various gender transitioning trajectories to that of *Mala Mala*'s primary representation of bodies. One of the opening scenes of *Mala Mala* centers Ivana Fred – a community health worker, LGBT activist, and transgender woman. After passing out condoms and lubricant to sex workers on Calle Condado, many of who are also transgender, the scene cuts and Ivana is shown in a sports bra doing squats and lifting weights by the water. With the body being

the clear point of focus of the scene, Ivana begins detailing the beginning stages of her transition and the relationship to her body at the time:

"For me, the moment I began my transition, the most important thing was my anatomy. I was a boy with really defined feminine physical characteristics. What I mean by that is that I always had long hair, I was always a slender person with smooth skin. My body structure wasn't toned, which is what tends to define you more as a boy."

She continues to describe how she understood herself and her body in relation to both her Puerto Ricanness and her femininity, and how that informed the trajectory of her transition:

"When I started my hormonal process, I started softening my skin. My texture in terms of my anatomy, started to change because I started to fill in with fat…cheekbones and other areas. And when I decided to shape my body, I realized I wanted to project myself as a Latin woman. The Latin woman has very pronounced hips and glutes."

Ivana evoking the image of the 'Latin Woman' as having pronounced hips and glutes mirrors U.S.-based conceptions of the stereotypical, universalized (fetishized and racist) idea of what a woman from Latin America looks like. This has both gendered implications - women look like X – and racialized implications – people from Latin America look like Y. Ivana is imagining herself in relation to both those pre-constructed, pre-supposed categories of both woman and 'Latina'. Though Ivana continues to acknowledge how her own embodiment of womanhood is subjective and not required to 'achieve' a 'successful' gender transition, she herself ascribes a particular value to that image of the 'Latin woman' body. For Ivana, the transgender 'Latin woman' body is associated with sexiness and intimidation ("we want to show off"), labor ("I have worked really hard to maintain it"), and pride ("I'm really satisfied with the body I have).

"I'm really satisfied with the body I have and I've worked really hard to maintain it. But I understand that not everyone is looking for the same results as I am. To have such a voluptuous body. And it's logical because we were not born with these looks; we want to show off!"

When it comes to the Latina body, its connections to a particular nation are ambiguous. Latinas can have ties anywhere from Uruguay to Cuba, each with a distinct history and culture. Once in the United States, the Latina body is inscribed with this idea of "Latin America": a region of over twenty countries and territories. Given this diversity, the physical expectations of what is supposed to fulfill the U.S. imaginary of the so-called "Latin woman" body are specific, limiting, and inherently marginalizing.

Here, the Latina body refers to an array of eroticized, racialized tropes about Latinas. These tropes are produced and circulated across a variety of mediums, including but not limited to pornography, film/TV, tourism marketing, beauty products, plastic surgeons, etc. Engagement with the "Latina body" has had a mixed bag of consequences and outcomes. On one hand, Latinas such as Jennifer Lopez and Selena – women whose outward expression of Latina-ness gestured towards the so-called "gluteal aesthetic" (Mendible 2007, 2) – exist as important symbols of ethnic pride for Latinxs in the United States. Mendible notes Frances Negrón-Muntaner's argument that Latinas' insistent focus on "big butts" is a response to the pain of being ignored, thought of as ugly, treated as low, yet surviving and even thriving through a belly-down epistemology (Mendible 2007, 2).

Thinking similarly to Maria Figueroa's critique of Josefina Lopez's play *Real Women Have Curves*, reclaiming and redefining the Latina body from its fatness,

undesirability, and marginality transforms the body into something that matters. At the same time, as Mendible notes, constantly working from this position runs the risk of the Latina body becoming nothing but a Latina body: racially marked for commodification, consumption, and circulation. Further, ascribing physical attributes as natural and authentic binds Latina femininity to "bodily excess, sexuality, or indulgence and imbuing Latinidad with a fixed set of traits, values, and images" (Mendible 2007, 3). Enke reminds us that we actually know nothing about ones' gender histories and identities (Enke 2012). This process of not knowing extends, I argue, to racial histories and identities such as Latinas. Not only does the "Latin woman" trope exclude bodies who do not embody this specific idea of Latina femininity, it homogenizes and essentializes bodies with Latin American affiliations.

Building off of feminist theorist Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Mendible extends this notion to the construction of Latinidad, arguing that ethnic groups are constituted through various classificatory, discursive acts, and corporeal exchanges (3). In other words, people's identification and engagement with concepts of gender and Latinidad facilitate the creation gender/Latindidad itself; they are made as they are constantly being named and remade. According to Mendible, reconceptualizing identity as an effect that is produced or generated – not fixed and foundational – allows the possibility of agency over oneself. As such, thinking of Latinidad as a fluid set of cultural boundaries that are consistently being reinforced, challenged, and negotiated by and through Latina bodies blurs yet reaffirms nationalistic ties and affiliations by distinguishing itself as specifically Latina.

In other words, the Latina body is, on one hand, tied to a home-nation that is not U.S-mainland based through the self-identification of being distinctly Latina. Latinx identified folks often specifically identify as Latinx versus American. On the other hand, the category of Latina is in itself a U.S. based category and requires the United States for it to exist even if it is an unequal and Othering relationship. Not only does it require the United States, but it requires the United States to racially and sexually function in a particular way to distinguish Latina bodies as specifically Latina. These internal racializing and Othering processes even within U.S. based categories of identity circles back to Mendible's analysis of Latina bodies paradoxical hypervisibility. A visibility in which efforts to be recognized tend to be founded upon essentialist and limiting Latina femininities, as well as being named, controlled, and disciplined. By focusing on the body (in this case the Latina body), we recognize not only the forging of a distinct U.S. national identity but also the dis/membering process of bodily differentiation and exclusion (Mendible 2007, 8).

It is with this multilayered understanding of the assumptions and circulation of gender, as well as the fluidity of the Latina/o body, that we examine how exactly bodies of so-called "variant" (meaning non-cis) genders manage to live in the everyday, including resistance in the form of a conformist path in order to survive a hostile public sphere. Soraya, a bleached blonde elder transgender woman covered head to toe in jewelry interviewed by Ivana in Male Mala, illustrates this conformist resistance. The scene starts with Ivana asking Soraya about how she identifies herself. For Soraya, there is a direct connection between the physical sex of a person and the sexual orientation:

Soraya: *I don't allow anyone, here in Puerto Rico or anywhere else, to tell me that I am a transsexual. Because if I have my papers where my sex is recognized as feminine, then why the hell should they feel the need to tell me that I'm a transsexual? What is that? If I don't even know what transsexual means sometimes, nor am I interested in knowing.*
Ivana*: So you identify as a sex change?*
Soraya: *No as a heterosexual Person. A woman.*
Ivana: *Okay, but that is your sexual preference.*
Soraya: *No, not my sexual preference. My birth certificate is the same as hers, the same as any other woman's in Puerto Rico.*

Here, 'sexual preference' appears to mean both the preference of bodily, physical sex *and* refers preference of sexual partners. Soraya is a heterosexual woman because she is legally a 'real' woman, proven by her birth certificate. The legality of a birth certificate – a mechanism employed by the nation state as a tool of categorizing, identifying, and ultimately regulating bodies – authenticates Soraya's womanhood. Soraya's status as a woman is even likened to cis women, asserting that there is no distinction between her transgender woman-ness and cis woman-ness thanks to her documents. Ivana asks Soraya to further clarify her position:

Ivana: *How would you feel comfortable with them identifying you? Because you identify as a woman because that's what's stated in your papers and your current sex at the moment is female, then you must also accept that there is a past that can't be erased…*

Soraya: *That there is a past that had nothing to do with transsexualism and instead with something known as gender dysphoria. That is a subject that has not been discussed here in Puerto Rico or the United States or anywhere! The difference is that a person born with gender dysphoria is a creature that can't recognize the sex it was born with. That person feels, loves, sings, laughs, and cries as woman with a gender identity that does not correspond to them. And that's where we can get an incongruence between the body, mind, and soul. Because I've met thousands of people who say they're transsexual and that they want to be a woman and this and that, with tits this big, and that's not what this is all about. Being a woman is something you hold in your heart and soul.*

Soraya identifies gender dysphoria as a central component of transgender experience. Appearing to distance herself from ideas of transness, Soraya credits the misunderstanding of those who suffer from gender dysphoria to creating the category of 'transsexual' as a type of (gendered) person. In other words, for Soraya there is not necessarily transsexuals, but men or women with gender dysphoria. Then, Soraya seems to evoke a different understanding of transness that expands beyond the body. It is not just an incongruence of the body and mind or sexual desire, but it is of the inner most essence of a person. That the incongruence is not just in the body but in the way the transgender subject feels, loves, sings, laughs, and cries. Soraya continues:

"Most of those who claim to be transsexual only make it halfway through the process, because as soon as they start to age, to gain weight, to lose their youth and stop being that Barbie they aspired to be, transexualism gets the boot. Because they don't look perfect anymore. So then what are you? A beauty queen? Or a woman? Because when you're a woman, you have to work with that you get.

Here, Soraya speaks of transness as having a linear and limited begin-end point, and in between those two points is the 'transition'. Soraya is frustrated with the naivety and delusions of 'so-called transsexuals', implicitly assigning a 'correctness' to certain trajectories of transness and transitioning, and other trajectories to be mistaken and ultimately incomplete. For Soraya, beauty queens are not women, but women-like. Here, beauty queens appears to describe trans-identified women who undergo various aesthetic and bodily changes to be 'in congruence' with their gender identity, but does not alter the physical sex of the body. For Soraya, that failure to address the physical sex to some degree (whether that be legally, physically, etc.) delineates who can and cannot be a

woman, which includes women of trans experience. When asked to clarify her distinction, Soraya confirms her association of being a 'real woman' and genitalia.

> ***Ivana:*** *So how would you define a person who hasn't changed their sex but does in fact present themselves as female; someone who has already had invasive procedures and those projected image has gone that extra step?*
>
> **Soraya:** *I've met them. Dolls. People who've even made movies in Hollywood. But many of them don't actually want to become women. They want to penetrate the men they sleep with. And I've never seen a real woman penetrate a man. Unless it's one of those things from Condom World. But if you say you are a woman, and that you feel like a woman, then you aspire to be a woman. One thing is to feel like a woman and another is to feel like a beauty queen. Those are two different things.*

Soraya appears to remain skeptical of those trans-identified women who do not go 'all the way' with their transition. Again, the idea of a 'real woman' founded on a biologized understanding of gender is evoked. Soraya claims that a real woman could never penetrate a man, because 'real women' do not have anything to penetrate with unless it is with a dildo, the implication being that to have a penis cancels out achieving 'real' womanhood. In this instance, being a real woman is also being heterosexual. Soraya's recreation of a cis-centered, heteronormative narrative of transgender experience mixed with evoking a larger, intrinsic, more divine, non-material narrative of feeling and 'knowing' womanhood further complicates Soraya's position as a transgender Puerto Rican. At the same time, Soraya is strategic in her deployment of essentialist and reductionist categories of identity because it ultimately allows her to make a claim for her own (otherwise invisible and/or devalued) identity. This paradox serves as a double-edged sword by both cutting at hegemonic culture while simultaneously reinscribing ideas of the nation, gender, and race on both sides of the border (Rodriguez 11 2003).

Drag Culture Within Trans Conceptualization

Within queer studies — with the exception of the works written by actual transgender people —drag is consistently valorized and deployed as evidence of gender performativity, whereas transgender individuals are interrogated as suspiciously dedicated to "essentialist" ideas of gender (Prosser 1998, 257). According to Jay Prosser, canonical queer theory texts are crucially dependent on the idea of the transgender figure due to the perception of transgender experience revealing the precarity of rigid gender/sex categories and its inherent demand for a reconceptualization of sexuality (Prosser 1998). Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* has particularly solidified this idea. Butler later asserted in her essay "Critically Queer (1993)" that this conclusion was not the initial intent of the book, that there were less than five paragraphs dedicated to drag, and that cross-gender identification "is not the exemplary paradigm for thinking about (deconstructive) homosexuality even though it may be one (Prosser 1998, 257)." Nevertheless, Butler's argument that all gender is performative mistakenly positions transgender subjects as concrete examples of gender performativity by assuming that gender identity is enacted through a type of theatrical production that can be turned on and off at the will of the individual performer. Such theorization paves the way for not only drag and transgender experience to be coupled into a homogenizing category of "crossing-gender," but assumes that transgender people are trying to be as cis as possible. Furthermore, unlike drag queens, transgender peoples' engagement with the physical aspects of gender expression (such as clothes and hair, amongst many other factors) does

not end after leaving the stage and certainly does not result in a paycheck. While drag and transgender experience may share common ingredients, “doing” gender for drag queens and kings and transgender people ultimately have vastly different stakes, consequences, and social values.

Despite this fact that drag queens and transgender people are two different and distinct ways of embodying gender and understanding the self, drag continues to be another trope used to illustrate transgender communities. Following the release of *Mala Mala*, LGBT magazine *GayLetter* interviewed the directors of the film in the voyeuristically titled article "Filmmakers Explore the Trans People of Puerto Rico (2014).” The article brought important context to the film in regards to who the filmmakers – Antonio Santini and Dan Sickles – were able to access to be part of the film, their own understandings of gender, transness, and Puerto Ricanness, as well as the overall intention of the film. Santini and Sickles, former NYU classmates, became inspired to create *Mala Mala* after being introduced to the world of drag queens in Austin, Texas after a performance by the popular drag queen Maggie McMuffins. This moment is important because it delineates the length of exposure to the subject matter, as well as how Sickles and Santini came to understand differently gendered people.

The inclusion of Alberic Prados (stage name Zahara Montiere) and Jason Carrión (stage name April Carrión), two drag queens who are cisgender gay men, in *Mala Mala* is an example of this tendency to conflate drag and transness. Alberic is first introduced in the film by saying “I love Regina George. Mean Girls is my favorite movie. I’m Regina

George in the Dollhouse." After continuing to describe his love for Regina George, he goes on to say:

"I was born a male. I want to a be a male. For as long as I live, amen. Until the day I die, I want to be a man. Amen. But if God come here and told me, you have to make your boobs and be a blonde and this transexual fabulous Marilyn Monroe Puerto Rican sensation, I would give. I would do it. Like, (imitates talking on the phone)"mom, I have to do my boob because God told me I have to do it!""

While not identifying as a transgender woman, Alberic appears to deeply align himself with femininity. In describing his inspiration for his drag persona Zahara Montiere, he says:

"I created Zahara Montiere out of my dreams of being a blonde girl that is captain of a cheerleading team, that is like the Regina George in everyone's life. That's why I create Zahara Montiere…I have this idea of I can be whatever I want to be, in my ideas. It doesn't have to be of a woman or male ideas, it is simply ideas. The ideas don't have a gender or a sex. Just ideas. Just ideas that come from the deepest part of the heart that cause inspiration, and my inspiration has always been Marilyn Monroe, and will always be that. She was not the President of the United States, but she was the girlfriend of one of the Presidents of the United States."

Similarly to Soraya, Alberic alludes to narrative of not necessary transness, but embodiment of gender that is largely dictated on feeling and having an intrinsic sense of self. However, Alberic's enactment of femininity, like drag, is temporary and not the same as enacting ideas of womanhood. Jason Carrión alludes to this distinction in his comments on auditioning for RuPaul's Drag Race:

"Who doesn't want to make it to RuPaul? That's every drag queen's goal. To reach that massive audience…making it there is a big accomplishment. It's no longer putting on a wig and doing a little show. This is your profession now. You make big bucks, I'm talking $200,000 a year, to dress up as a woman for five minutes, do a show, go home, you have five days off."

Jason's comments are an important moment in illustrating how drag and transgender people, while both may challenge certain normative notions of gender, ultimately live, do, and rely on gender differently from each other. While at times there is a crossover of the two worlds and transgender people may have a presence in drag communities, transgender people cannot take off their wigs and collect a paycheck after five minutes of "doing" gender. While *Mala Mala* is intended to be a film about the transgender community in Puerto Rico, "transgender community" in *Mala Mala* includes drag queens and transgender people. Drag queens are often lumped into the category of transgender despite not being mutually exclusive ideas. Considering this film is one of the first overt, publicly accessible illustrations of Puerto Rican transness, the context of the filmmakers is essential to better grasp both the strengths and limitations of the film in representing the racial and gender formations at work in Puerto Rico. Nevertheless, *Mala Mala* is an important contribution to the conversation of Puerto Rican transgender identity and provides insight into the way transgender people in Puerto Rico engage with their bodies to navigate their respective local realities.

Moving Forward

Having said all of this, it is here I would like to expand the geographic assumptions and requirements of Puerto Rican identity by turning to illustrations of the Puerto Rican diaspora to further examine the ways in which Puerto Rican transgender people come to feel, to know, and identify themselves in regard to their gender and sense of Puerto Ricanness. Queers move with their cultures, reinventing the forms and

meanings in which they invest their products through their migrations (Luibhéid and Cantú 184). For Puerto Rico, the island's nationalist discourse has been largely defined through the island's relationship to the United States (Rangelova 77). The case of Puerto Rico is unique due to its complex and contradictory political status, cultural norms, and mixed citizenship benefits. Puerto Ricans are citizens of the United States, cannot vote in elections, but are able to join the United States military. Although Caribbean identity knowledge production privileges the geographically bound space of the island, cultural productions, traditions, and other ways of being rooted in Puerto Rican-island insular spatiality are reproduced and reconfigured in the diaspora. This rhetoric of insularity fundamentally problematicizes the dominance of the island itself as the locus of Caribbean knowledge productions, ascribing importance to the diaspora as a significant source of cultural formations (Goldman 2003; Arroyo 2010).

Further, reproductions of the nation are heavily informed by local conceptions and representations of Puerto Ricanness. For example, Puerto Ricans from the New York/New Jersey/Pennsylvania area, aka Nuyoricans, display their Puerto Ricanness in a particular fashion, often understood to be more overt and public than island-born Puerto Ricans. Despite Puerto Rico's legal and political status, a strong national ethos — puertorriqueñismo — developed and continues to flourish. In fact, some of the strongest puertorriqueñismo comes from Puerto Ricans outside of the island, particularly in places such as Orlando, New York City, and Chicago. According to José Muñoz, echoing the works of Chicana feminist Norma Alarcón, the self-imagining of oneself as specifically Latinx in the United States is to occupy an "identity-in-difference". If Latinxs do not

subscribe to a common racial, class, gender, religious, home country, or national category, how is it possible to *know* latinidad and to *feel* Latinx (Muñoz 67)? This historically and culturally specific reality of Latinxs, according to Muñoz, blocks Latinxs from successfully performing racialized normativity in relation to U.S. binary racial and ethnic structures. The term "structure of feeling" coined by Raymond Williams interrogates the "connections and points of solidarity between working-class groups" that experience the social world as "in process" yet historically situated. Both "identity-in-process" and "identity-in-difference" allude to the technical in-betweenness of Latinx identification. Simultaneously, despite such potential nebulosity, Latinx identification remains firmly grounded in actualized local cultural codes and ways of life primarily enacted through *feeling* Latinx (Munoz 68).

I demonstrate this sense of feeling Latinx in the following chapter by creating the following short story titled "Barrio Queer". "Barrio Queer" follows the memory and coming-to-being of protagonist Daniel, a young Puerto Rican transgender man from Philadelphia. "Barrio Queer" illustrates the racialized and cis/gendered dimensions of conceptions of (trans) gender embodiment and Puerto Rican identity, the connection to the divine, national belonging amongst diasporic subjects, and feminist introspection of masculinity. as illustrated through protagonist Daniel. The cultural myths and ideas surrounding the display of diasporic Puerto Rican pride versus island-born Puerto Rican pride is one of many examples of how a strong sense of puertorriqueñismo on, off, and between the island(s) coupled with the non-sovereignty status of Puerto Rico shows that rather than weakening the nation-state, transnational subjects are actually bound to the

nation in their constant remaking of it (Pratt and Yeoh 159). It is through this constant engagement with the nation through a sense of (not) belonging that provides insight as to how latinidad functions, (re)makes and circulates itself through diasporic bodies. Additionally, I would like to focus on creating life narratives of diasporic Puerto Rican trans men not only due to their invisibility across all arenas of transgender visibility and representation, but to also examine masculinity as a complex, messy, and formative component of life for Puerto Rican trans men, as well as contribute to knowledge and ideas of masculinity outside of a dominant cisgender male context. It is with this context and positionality of diasporic Puerto Rican transgender men that I present to you "Barrio Queer", a narrative of transness and transgender *life* that centers gender, sexuality, race, family – particularly members of family who are women – and the constant pursuit of working towards a sense of belonging and personal liberation.

CHAPTER 2: BARRIO QUEER

I. Philly-Rican

Every bit of my essence feels so fully and surely Puerto Rican – a land my mother nor myself have ever stepped foot on. North Philly was basically Lil Puerto Rico, though. There are a lot of Lil Puerto Rico's in this area, actually. I remember smoking with my cousins on Sedgewick Avenue in the Bronx and a guy who was actually from Puerto Rico walked by and immediately recognized what we shared.

"Boricua?!" he shouted.

"Ayyyy, pa'que sepa!" I sat and watched as my cousins bro-ed down with this *hermano* -- a tall, skinny, cinnamon-colored auto-mechanic named Tito. Without even being asked, my older cousin Alex tells Tito, "We are from Santurce! But Julia was born here. She is Philly Rican."

With a straight face, I felt my cousins words migrate down from my ears to my stomach, striking a big "fuck you" when passing through my chest. Not only does being called "she" get under my skin, but did he really just "*but* she was born here" me? It was in these moments I felt shy about my Puerto Ricanness. Maybe that is ridiculous because after all, I was born and raised in the U.S. I could be overthinking it. But my cousin's clarification of where I was born felt like coded language for making sure Tito knew that there was something about me that just wasn't fully legit. That my body is in a constant state of 'not quite' and that included my gender, my national identity, and my sense of belonging.

Tito did not pick up on the possible hostility behind Alex's comment. He laughed, "Bueno! Philadelphia, Nueva York, Nueva Jersey, and Orlando – todos son Puerto Rico Extendido. You can tell by the nose." I laughed and appreciated the affirmation, but I watched my cousins roll their eyes at the response.

I'm sure they wanted to remind me again how light my skin was, how English was the only language I could speak besides broken Spanglish, and how I can't even understand the words to all the reggaeton, salsa, and merengue I love yet I listen to it anyway. And it was true. I can understand Spanish, but stumble and twist on my words too much to respond. I can rap every word Vico C and Hector Lavoe ever wrote, but am not quite sure what they all mean.

I was one of the lightest in my family yet had the thickest and curliest hair, widest nose, and fullest lips of anyone else. That is the funny thing about Puerto Ricans. One person can be Black with blue eyes and light hair, another with olive skin and small eyes, and one white with the hair and facial features of Diana Ross – all of them siblings.

I guess looking so ambiguous is beautiful yet intriguing for people. Not when it comes to gender, though. That shit has to be straight forward or people lose their mind. For Puerto Ricans, "What are you?" is a well-intentioned curiosity; *who is this strange and exotic, not-white-not-Black-not-Asian person*? For transgender Puerto Ricans like me, "What *are* you?" is an alarmed and confused cry for clarification; *Are you a boy or a girl? Either way, are you sure you are doing either of them right? And by the way, where are you from?* How odd to have constant eyes scanning your body for the marks of

colonization. How precarious it felt for my light skin, inability to speak Spanish, and Afro-blessed hair to be thought of together as distinct markers of my Puerto Ricanness.

II. Despierta Boricua, Defiende Lo Tuyo

If I was born in the 50s, I would have been a Young Lord. That was all I could think as I sat beaming with pride as I watched the PBS special "Palante, Siempre Palante!" on my grandparents' dinosaur of a TV.

"Diablo, Julia, you love this shit."

This shit. Racism, Puerto Rican independence, police brutality, poverty - that was the shit my grandma was referring to. My family was always teasing me about my social justice oriented mind. Even when I was fresh out the womb, La Bruja down the block told my grandparents that I would have a troubled mind because my heart felt too much. That my soul absorbed energy and I was too empathetic and that would get me in trouble. I didn't think that it took being sensitive and feeling so much to care about the humanity of others, but I was definitely the odd one out in this family.

What I don't get is how is it that my family left Puerto Rico because they were poor and lived in the hood, only to move to North Philly - another hood – only to barely survive on food stamps and welfare, live in section 8, have your kid and nephew killed, and generally have a low quality of life? How was it that Puerto Rico was the dangerous, poor place without any hope? I mean, damn, at least we could have been poor by a poisoned beach instead of poor by a prison and a sewage plant! But in Philly, every other family is Puerto Rican, with restaurants and botanicas on every block, local shows and

cultural center events. North Philly is where Puerto Ricanness gets created and recreated over and over by Puerto Ricans and for Puerto Ricans. Maybe that is why my grandparents are so comfortable in their denial; they never really had to give up their Puerto Ricanness despite leaving the island. Maybe that is how I have been able to feel so deeply and intrinsically Boricua.

Regardless of my pride, my grandparents constantly knocked down anything overtly pro-Puerto Rican independence, anti-racist, and generally anything progressive towards the well being of people. They were homophobic, transphobic, racist, sexist, pro-military, and very "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" kind of folks. At the same time, they unconditionally loved and nurtured my queer ass self, never once overtly or violently discouraging me from being true to myself, despite the fact they called me Julia and she instead of Daniel and he, and basically acted as if I did not beg them to make me an appointment at the LGBT clinic for the last year. It was Caribbean conservatism in its most bizarre and complex strain.

What did my family gain from policing and constraining my gender identity and my Puerto Ricanness? Was there something larger at stake that I was missing? They can accept how I feel on the inside but any agency over my body is taking things too far.

Ten cuidao. They told me they feared for my safety. That this is an ugly and cold world for people like me, and that my softness will blind me from the dangers that immediately become attracted to bodies that are poor, trans, and Brown. That they had not left their ghetto paradise to have the only niece of the family homeless, a whore, and eventually killed because she thinks she is a boy - a failure as both a man and as a Puerto

Rican. And even though I am suffering, *estoy bien,* because a legacy of resilience, of mothers and divine ancestors are within us. Within me.

III. Demonio

One thing I hate about Puerto Ricans is how fake they are when it comes to religion. First, they go *hard* - most of them are Catholics, Evangelicals and Pentecostals. My grandparents, cousin, Aunt and her "friend" Jasmine go to church every single day. Can you believe that? In the morning, too! The airport or a death are the only two things to get me up before sunrise.

Jasmine Moreno is my Aunt's "friend" aka her lover of the last eleven years that is a completely unspoken thing in the family. They live together. She shows up to every family function and that seriously included church on Sundays and every other day Jasmine had off from work in time during the week. God. I could never put that much time into church, especially for a family that hated me. Despite Jasmine's strict dedication to church and to my hatin' extra-religious family, Jasmine was still not the right kind of Catholic, nor woman, nor Boricua. Born in Loiza, Jasmine was Black with green eyes, fat, and tattooed with long purple dreadlocks that she always tied back. Recently initiated, she wore white every day in the flyest way I have ever seen. Homegirl went to church in a white Kangol, white Timberlands, white Adidas track pants, and a white Tank top. Can I just be her? Not enough to get me in church, though.

So you know you won't catch me there. But they do it. And they are constantly telling me how God will punish me forever if I change what he created, because God

destined me for womanhood. My body had a natural inevitability and it was larger than me. Am I really about to argue against God? *God forgives* is usually how I reply; because when it comes to gender, being true to yourself is the only time the truth is actually betrayal and requires forgiveness.

So they are on all that Bible shit, family queer as hell but on the low, and then on top of their loved ones being in the closet, you know what else there?

Brujeria.

Puerto Ricans are always on some brujo shit; even the hardest of the Catholics. My grandma will come home from church on Sunday, clean the house, leave pieces of coconut shells re-fashioned as a bowl full of popcorn on the corner of the tables in the living room, all while mopping and spray it down with St. Michael's room spray and cleaner. What kind of "Catholic" shit is that?

Ancestral knowledge made it so Puerto Ricans know Yemeyá and Oshun will metaphorically beat their ass if they start acting up and forgetting about Mami and all the women before them. It's like everyone is a brujo on the side and in secret. The rituals and knowledge is part of their understanding of the world and the divine. But most would never identify as a santero or anything like that, certainly not be formally initiated or Priest/esshood unless you were *really* about it. Maybe readings, elekes, altars, but Priesthood? I'm not stupid though. I know where those chickens go. Who are they trying to fool? Chickens in Philly? Obviously some brujo shit.

IV. Sigue Pa'Lante

I met Mona on a queer dating app. My profile still said female and had my birth name, and I wasn't in the mood to think about my body like that. Plus, these apps are mostly just strokes to the ego and nobody really talks to each other. I looked at her profile and *damn*. She was tall, dark skinned and Jamaican, natural haired and had the body of a dancer. Literally – she was a dance major at Temple University. She was beautiful, talented, political, and messaged me 10 minutes after matching on the app. We barely exchanged hellos and I already felt inadequate. I was a mostly closeted, pre-testosterone trans guy living with his family in North Philly, selling weed and on my 3rd year at community college. I really had nothing to offer her unless she was on another level of selfless, enlightened shit.

"What pronouns do you prefer?"

"What?" I was stunned. Never in my life have I been asked this question. To be honest, I was almost offended at first because it was so bizarre. Who asks that? All this was going through my head and I had not answered her question yet. Plus I asked her to clarify the question. Really? What kind of queer am I?

Mona could tell there was some tension inside of me that was triggered by her question. *Honest. I want to know what you prefer* she reassured. The distinction was "prefer".

"Honestly? I prefer male pronouns, but nobody calls me that and I have not really asked anyone to. Nobody really knows."

"What about a name?" Was she really asking me to name myself? I mean, I told my family the name Daniel, but had I really thought about it? Do I want to be called Daniel? Was this the first moment in my possible future of actually living true to myself? I was overwhelmed at such a sudden, small, simple moment. Had I known I was going to become so vulnerable in the middle of a crowded Starbucks, maybe I would have reconsidered coming. Maybe I should have considered this as a possibility, though. All these progressive, politically correct people. I felt like I was part of what they were talking about but I was too uneducated on the subject matter to feel authentically part of the conversation. Ironic, no?

I asked if she wanted to smoke a cigarette. We went outside and sat by the curb. Eight cigarettes later, I spilled my whole damn queer heart out to this stranger. I don't know who I thought I was, but she listened. She listened to me tell her about how I prayed since I was little for God to make me a boy, and curse him in the morning when I woke up to another broken heart. Not that I really knew that making me a boy looked like or meant, but some things you just know and learn the words for them later.

They say that trans people are obsessed with bodies and genitals, but it is actually cis people who are obsessed. When you think of trans, you never hear about ancestors, the sacred, of connection to the earth and to people, of self-reflection and honesty, color and creativity, sweetness, and love. Just dicks and pussy. Mona saw me for the man I was, and my heart nearly burst from being so soothed and so broken all at the same time.

"My line sister's boyfriend is trans, and he gets his hormones for free at the Mazzoni Center on Locust Street. They operate on sliding scale and do informed consent for hormones, so you don't have to go through a therapist."

I already knew everything she was telling me. It was the same place my family has been refusing to take me for over a year, but I melted at the fact that she even knew this information. Who was this woman?

"I know, but I don't have a way to get there, and I don't have the money right now for it. And my family doesn't really understand. I can't just start hormones, you know? I can eat pussy on the low but transitioning is different. Eventually they're gonna be like, 'Nena, why do you have a beard and look just like Alex?' They already mix up all our names. It will all be too much!"

I was joking and being playful to cover up the harsh reality that hormones was not really possible for me. And I didn't really want hormones. I only wanted the idea of them because I think they would help me pass. So then who am I taking the hormones for then? It's complicated, all this trans shit.

"Well, if you want to go, I will take you and pay for your medicine." I should have left right there. Is she forreal?

"But…you don't even know me. Well, not know me well. Why would you offer something so serious? I'm not saying I don't appreciate it. I'm just surprised..." I was rambling at this point and paranoid that I was accidentally a total dick to someone that just took on all my baggage and then offered to put her money to help me address my most deepest and personal issue. *This trans shit is so complicated.*

Lucky for me, Mona gets it more than me. *Who is this woman?* She laughed with my awkward, queer, confused self on that curb until the street lights came on. She took me home, and at 4 a.m. the next morning while smoking on her balcony, I used her laptop to make a new patient appointment with the Mazzoni Center for a hormone replacement therapy consultation. Confirmed. I shut the computer and she sat in my lap. She hugged me as I cried my fear, my internalized transphobia, my guilt of betraying my family, and my uncertainty of the future into the darkness of the night. It was a cry so deep the neighbors woke in tears, stunned and unable to remember what happened. It was a cry from the pit of the stomach, up the throat, and pushed out of the body that engulfed your entire being like a flame to a pool of gasoline. The kind of cry that belonged only to a wounded, depressed, suppressed, tender-hearted soul. The kind of pain that snatches the words from your throat and your mind. How pathetic that such a selfless, divine Black woman is out here taking on my tragic mulatto trans man problems. But she knows that this shit is complicated. *This trans shit is so complicated.*

V. La Mujer

"I heard those hormones make you gay. Nacy told me someone at the salon had a friend whose brother's daughter wanted a dick, too. She started shooting up like you and now she does gay bear porn. Ten cuidao with that shit, Jul – carajo! What was the name? Daniel? Sorry, nena. You'll just always be Julia to me!"

You'll always be Julia to me. How is it that my own mother has only seen me a few times in her life until this year, yet I am always Julia to her? It's not like she had to

say my name everyday or something. But I guess I can't be too bitter. She is the only one related to me that will even speak to me right now.

Ten months. It took ten months for the hormones to take me up and spit me out a new face, voice, and body shape that sent my family straight into mourning. They were so broken over my new look that they contacted my estranged, previously incarcerated, former drug addicted mother to "deal" with me. I felt like a monster, but at this point it was too late. The damage was already done and I was in this for the long haul. I would have never thought an app I used when I was horny and bored would lead to this new chapter, let alone my birth mother being my only source of support.

Being a man, a boyfriend, and a son felt both natural yet unfamiliar and overwhelming. I always liked women, but now I was seen as a straight man and not a lesbian. The masculinist shit that the stud and dyke world can often pass off as charming and confidence meant something completely different in this new body. Not that I was ever a macho or wanted to be one, but I could see the fear in women's eyes when they saw me now. My ability to either disgust or impress a woman was now met with either fear and/or some sense of doubt at what exactly I was doing and who I was. My still feminine appearance mixed with my budding masculine features made me look like a super dyke or a very young man. Both undesirable. It was uncomfortable for everyone involved, but the love around me from my mom, from Mona, from my ancestors, from the Orishas, and even the love I know my family has for me but cannot practice right now due to their own fears kept me grounded as I explored how to move in this body.

I had lived in this body for 20 years yet it felt as if I was a newborn horse wobbling around trying to figure out why the hell it just fell on the ground and what this strange, new, colorful world it just entered was all about. It wasn't so much that I felt different. I felt as if I was meeting the world with the same old me, but the world was meeting me differently, and that was what nobody told me about nor did I expect or could have predicted. My consultation at the clinic didn't prepare me what it would feel like to lose the sense of comradery, trust, and kinship women of color experience between each other. Or that navigating gross, everything-phobic, and toxic male comradery was to come. I was not prepared to lose and have to retrain the singing voice I worked tirelessly at by singing boleros I had no idea the meaning of since I was 3 years old. That the sense of authority and expectation of you behind the drum when playing bomba is every bit tied to your masculinity. That waking up at 4 am on Christmas Eve to prepare a feast of pernil, pasteles, arroz con gandules, bacalao, and tostones would be met with praise, awe, and deemed extraordinary for a man to do instead of a *thank you for cooking, amor* and a drunken impatience for dinner to just be done already. *They didn't tell me that at the consultation.*

There is this idea that when you transition from female to male, you turn into a violent, patriarchal, privilege-seeking jerk. That you are supposed to engage in everything manly, and 'manly' here has little variety. You are supposed to hate your body and reject any and all parts of you that leave any trace of the feminine. Yet, it was in this body that I truly learned how to recognize, love, and honor the women in my life and my ancestors and the feminine divine. It was in this body, this new social world of being a man, that I

wanted to preserve, honor and display with undying love and pride every bit of feminine energy available to me. *They didn't tell me that at the consultation. This trans shit is so complicated.*

CONCLUSIONS

In asking, “how do transgender latinxs foster a sense of belonging to ideas of gender and latinidad?”, it is the question more so than the answer that is the moment of intervention that forces a confrontation with the assumptions made of both transgender and latinx identities and communities (Rodriguez 71 2003). Both gender and race are read on the body. This is not to say that race and gender have actual inherent biological realities, but that the illusion of normative gender and racial categories (according to, in this case, the United States’ binary conceptions of race and gender) are commonly understood to be determined by the body. This reading of race and gender is further complicated for transgender Latinxs in the United States. Latinxs fall under any and all racial categories. However, due to a rigid black/white racial binary, Latinxs are typically read (by each other, and by non-Latinxs – socially and in media) and compartmentalized as non-Latinx black, “brown”, or white passing — all identifications that may change depending on the context and space of the Latinx. Claudia Milian in *Latining America: Black-Brown Passages and the Coloring of Latino/a Studies* (2013) quotes sociologist Saskia Sassen "the modern twenty-first century citizen...is...being remade in bits and pieces," as a point of departure to introduce constructions of "Latin and Latinness" within U.S. Latino and Latina subject and cultural formation (Milian 3). Here, the bits and pieces of latinidad under U.S. black-white racial systems refer to the multiple racial and sociocultural positionalities experienced by Latinxs that position Latinxs on a racial

spectrum of white to dark brown, where Blackness mistakenly operates as a separate, non-Latinx racial category (Milian 26).

This racial dynamic combined with the phenomena of Latinxs frequently identifying with a nationality in place of a race (i.e.: "I'm Puerto Rican") further complicates the social orientation of Latinxs in the United States. Even though Latinx is not actually a race, the execution of the category of Latinx under the United States racial binary system functions similarly to a racial category despite its inherent diversity and ambiguity. There are even Latinxs who do not speak Spanish, are disconnected from their heritage countries, and would likely never be accepted as Latin American outside of the United States, yet still strongly identify with and *feel* Latinx. All of this illustrates some of the many ways in which Latinx bodies undergo constant examination and tension with U.S. racial identifiers.

In addition to race, gender also has bodily implications. Foucault understands race as an artificial, hierarchized biologization of social, cultural, linguistic, or economic differences within a supposedly biologically monist population (Foucault 1997 80). The racism through which biopower operates positions transgender subjects, particularly transgender subjects of color, at the margins of the biopolitically operated-upon body at those fleeting and variable points and moments in which transgender people and their bodies both exceed and/or elude capture within the gender apparatus (Stryker 40). Conventional heteronormative beliefs about the nature of gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation position cisgender people as the default/expected gendered person. In other words, it is assumed you are cis and NOT transgender unless 1) you state

otherwise 2) do not appear to pass according to cisgender standards. For example, imagine being with your friends and someone tells you to turn around to "take a look at that guy." Your eyes immediately scan the crowd of people to find him, and you immediately begin compartmentalizing the crowd into "guys" and "not guys". Here, "guy" has predefined conditions and expectations in order for you to successfully locate this person (even though nobody can really know anything about anyone's gender just by looking). This relatively small example illustrates a much larger gendering process at work, similar to racialization, that requires a constant "reading" of the body to assess gender at all times. Popular Queer Studies discourse(s) (Butler 1990; Sedgwick 1993) has managed to use the existence of transgender people as evidence to support theories of gender performativity. But being transgender has little to do with doing gender and everything to do with feeling gender regardless of what you do. In other words, for example, a transgender woman feels like a woman and also experiences being transfeminine in the lived world/society long before she ever enacts that feeling, if she ever does at all.

While nobody can ever really know if anyone is transgender just by looking at them, people still think they can figure it out based on this assumed proximity to cisness. Given these assumptions, the body is (subconsciously or not) heavily scrutinized in search of clues of gender. Transgender people fundamentally challenge these very conceptions and requirements of (cis) gender not by performing gender but *feeling* gender. Gender is ascribed significant emotional meaning — from familial, generational transmission to personal engagement throughout the course of life — that is inextricably

linked to racial/ethnic/national identifications. As a transgender Latinx man of Puerto Rican heritage living in the diaspora, regardless of how Latinx I may (not) feel or how much of a man I may feel, my body is (against my will) at the forefront of being read as both a man and Latinx, even if such a reading is not always successful across certain times and spaces. I understand this bodily, affective, transnational, and socioeconomic experience of being both Latinx and transgender to foster a so-called gendered "double consciousness (Du Bois 1903)" in the everyday. The subject is constantly navigating and negotiating not only their own inherent gender identity, but also the various ways in which the world looks onto them in relation to gender (and their perceived racial identity). It is precisely due to this multiplicity of shifting racial and gendered interpretations, coupled with the constant management of feeling something and being read as "something else", something other, that the aforementioned bodily negotiations transgender Latinx subjects experience to foster a sense of (not) belonging to both gender *and* latinidad are crucial inclusions to narratives and portrayals of transgender embodiment.

Throughout *Mala Mala, The Salt Mines,* and Sirena Selena, the image of the sex worker, the drag queen, and/or the cisgender person is frequently evoked to portray the transgender Latinx experience. At the same time, several subjects described gender embodiment as being more than just a matter of bodies, and being about a matter of feeling and soul. This turn to narratives of transness concerning more than bodies is further emphasized in *Strut*, where the characters all take different trajectories, longings, and beliefs towards medical and surgical means of gender transitioning. Further, *Strut*

moves away from the trope of the isolated and miserable sex worker and street walker, emphasizing family reconciliation, efforts towards self-love, and moving towards sustainable and fulfilling futures. *Strut* also provided dialogue on the intersectional nature of issues of racism and transphobia in and out of the modeling industry. Overall, Male Mala, *Strut*, Salt Mines, and Sirena Selena at different moments worked to go along with, against, and re-defined the three commonly deployed tropes of transgender representation and serve as important examples of both narratives of transgender embodiment and contemporary transgender latinxs representation.

Transgender Latinx subjects living in the United States diaspora undergo constant negotiations, tensions, and practices within, through, and against their bodies in order to foster a sense of belonging to both gender and latinidad. These bodily implications — factors that go beyond understanding transgender people as "performing" the opposite gender — are crucial inclusions to narratives and representations of gender embodiment because they not only expand understandings of how transgender people "do" gender, but they directly connect the embodiment of gender to culturally/ethnically specific modes of "doing" gender that are maintained through a sense of feeling - feeling both Latinx and feeling Latinx as a (trans) gendered person. The body — due to its hypervisbility and not because it holds any inherent, biological truths — is at the forefront of how ones' race/ethnicity and gender is likely to be "read" and interpreted, as well as the primary platform on how to represent ideas of gender and race in media. Transgender Latinxs — their lives, their bodies, their modes of belonging — become misrepresented and lost in this shuffle. While the sense of feeling transgender and feeling Latinx remains constant,

being actually read and interpreted as Latinx and as a properly gendered person (meaning, the gender you are/identify with) remains in flux due to the rigidity of gendered expectations and variability of Latinx identification. Therefore, highlighting the ways in which *feeling* Latinx and *feeling* transgender manifests into personal bodily engagements (otherwise invisible to traditional and rigid notions of gender and Latinx), as well as how those feelings are enacted, challenged, and/or negotiated within the social offers crucial insight as to how transgender Latinxs (re)define and foster a sense of belonging to Latinidad as (trans) gendered people.

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